

Message Text

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TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 7724
INFO AMEMBASSY AMAAN
USINT BAGHDAD
AMEMBASSY BEIRUT
AMEMBASSY CAIRO
AMCONSUL JERUSALEM
AMEMBASSY JIDDA
AMEMBASSY TEHRAN
AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV
AMEMBASSY LONDON
AMEMBASSY MOSCOW

S E C R E T SECTION 1 OF 2 DAMASCUS 2269

EXDIS

C O R R E C T E D C O P Y (TEXT CORRECTED)

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PEPR, SY, XF
SUBJ: ASSAD CONFRONTS NEGOTIATIONS

1. SUMMARY: AS WE FACE THE MONTHS AHEAD PRESIDENT AL-ASSAD'S APPROACH TO NEGOTIATING MAY BE ONE OF THE FEW CONSTANTS IN THE MIDDLE EAST EQUATION. HE SEEMS CONFIDENT HE CAN ACHIEVE HIS FULL OBJECTIVES WITHOUT COMPROMISE IF HE CAN ONLY ALTER THE POWER BALANCE IN THE AREA. HE DOES NOT BELIEVE THE ISRAELIS WILL MEET HIS MINIMAL CONDITIONS FOR PEACE AS LONG AS THEY HAVE ONLY HIS PROTRACTED INTRANSIGENCE TO FEAR. ASSAD CONTINUES TO OPPOSE SADAT'S APPROACH OF OFFERING PEACE AND RENOUNCING WAR, SINCE HE IS CONVINCED IT CAN ONLY

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LEADE TO SATISFYING ISRAEL'S OBJECTIVES--TO RETAIN TERRITORY AND GAIN SECURITY BY DIVIDING THE ARABS. ASSAD WILL OPT OUT OF ANY EXPANDED NEGOTIATION BASED ON SADT'S APPROACH. WHILE HE HAS THE POTENTIAL TO DISRUPT EXPANDED NEGOTIATIONS WE CAN MINIMIZE HIS IMPACT ON THE MODERATE ARAB STATES TO THE EXTENT THEY ARE CONVINCED THE US WILL SUPPLY THE MUSCLE NECESSARY TO MOVE ISRAEL TO SATISFY MINIMUM ARAB DEMANDS. WE MAY ALTER ASSAD'S PER-

CEPTION OF THE NEGOTIATING PROCESS, WHICH AT PRESENT HE THINKS SHOULD BE A MECHANISM TO SWING THE BALANCE OF POWER TO THE ARABS' FAVOR. BUT THIS WILL TAKE TIME AND SOME DIFFICULT DECISIONS ON OUR PART. IN THE INTERIM, PERHAPS WE SHOULD NOT WORRY UNDULY ABOUT SYRIA'S PARTICIPATION IN THE NEGOTIATING PROCESS. END SUMMARY.

2. OVER THE PAST FOUR YEARS PRESIDENT AL-ASSAD HAS TALKED PUBLICLY ABOUT EXPANDING THE BASE OF HIS LEADERSHIP AND CENTRALIZING AUTHORITY. FOR WHATEVER REASON, BUT PROBABLY INHERENT IN HIS CHARACTER, HE HAS NOT DONE SO IN ANY PRACTICAL TERMS. INSTEAD, AS HE HAS COME UNDER ATTACK, MOST RECENTLY THROUGH ASSASSINATION OF HIS KIN, HE HAS TURNED INWARD. THE NUMBER OF HIS POLITICAL INTIMATES HAS DECREASED--JAMIL BEING THE MOST RECENT EXAMPLE--AND NO NEW FACES HAVE TAKEN THEIR PLACE IN HIS INNER CIRCLE. IT MAY BE INAPPROPRIATE TO SPEAK OF THE REGIME'S "EXHAUSTION," AS SOME SYRIANS DO. THE PRESIDENT, DESPITE SOME LOSS OF POPULARITY IS STILL CLEARLY IN CHARGE AND IT IS CERTAINLY INACCURATE TO RAISE ALARMS ABOUT SHORT-TERM STABILITY, BARRING THE LUCKY OR CLEVER ASSASSIN. NEVERTHELESS, ASSAD'S FAILURE TO ALTER THE NATURE OF HIS GOVERNMENT OR INTRODUCE NEW MEN TO HIS INTIMATE COUNCILS LEADS ME TO DOUBT THAT HE IS READY TO CHANGE HIS APPROACH TO MIDDLE EAST PROBLEMS. AS WE FACE THE MONTHS AHEAD ASSAD'S APPROACH TO NEGOTIATIONS MAY BE ONE OF THE FEW CONSTANTS WE CAN COUNT ON IN THE MIDDLE EAST EQUATION.

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3. ASSAD'S NEGOTIATING OBJECTIVES ARE WELL DEFINED AND UNLIKELY TO CHANGE. STATED AS AN ESTIMATE OF THEIR MINIMUM TERMS THESE OBJECTIVES ARE: A) AGREEMENT IN PRINCIPLE TO RESTORATION OF SYRIAN SOVEREIGNTY IN THE GOLAN (ASSAD AVERS SECURITY ARRANGEMENTS ARE OPEN TO NEGOTIATIONS ALONG WITH THE TIMING AND PHASING OF WITHDRAWAL, BUT I WOULD NOT EXPECT HIM TO AGREE TO ANY REAL DEROGATION OF SYRIAN SOVEREIGNTY THERE); B) ANY SOLUTION OF THE PALESTINIAN PROBLEM WHICH SATISFIES (OR NEUTRALIZES) A MAJORITY AMONG THE PLO AND ITS SUPPORTERS IN LEBANON AND SYRIA; C) A SOLUTION OF THE JERUSALEM QUESTION WITH WHICH THE SAUDIS CAN LIVE (ASSAD, AN ALAWITE IN A SUNNI WOULD, CAN'T LAG FAR BEHIND KING KHALID ON THIS ISSUE). ASSAD GIVES EVERY INDICATION OF BELIEVING THAT HIS GOALS ARE OBJECTIVELY REALIZABLE GIVEN THE RIGHT SET OF CONDITIONS IN THE AREA, AND HE DEMONSTRATES A REMARKABLE CAPACITY TO LIVE WITH UNCERTAINTY WHILE WORKING TO CHANGE CONDITIONS TO HIS FAVOR. AS LONG AS HE BELIEVES HE CAN ATTAIN HIS GOALS, ASSAD HAS NO REASON TO CONSIDER COMPROMISING THEM; THEY ARE NOT AT THIS POINT MERELY BARGAINING POSITIONS.

4. IN SEEKING TO AFFECT THE NEGOTIATING ENVIRONMENT, ASSAD HAS TWO BASIC COURSE OPEN: OFFERING INCENTIVES WHICH WOULD MODIFY ISRAELI BEHAVIOR, THE COURSE CHOSEN BY SADAT, OR FORGOING CONVINCING DISINCENTIVES FOR ISRAELI INTRANSIGENCE. ASSAD, LIKE MOST SYRIANS, NEVER BELIEVED THAT ISRAEL WOULD RESPOND TO POSITIVE INCENTIVES ALONE. SADAT'S RECORD TO DATE OF ACCOMPLISHMENTS CONVINCE ASSAD HIS EVALUATION IS CORRECT. AS ASSAD SEES IT, EACH TIME SADAT HAS REMOVED HIMSELF A STEP FURTHER FROM MILITARY CONFRONTATION WITH ISRAEL, AS IN THE 1975 SINAI AGREEMENT AND THE TRIP TO JERUSALEM, ISRAEL HAS HAD LESS TO FEAR FROM RENEWED WAR. ASSAD CONSIDERS ISRAEL HAS AS A RESULT BECOME MORE AGGRESSIVE, MORE ARROGANT, AND LESS INCLINED TO ACCOMMODATE WHAT HE HAS DEFINED AS THE MINIMALLY ACCEPTABLE ARAB GOALS. ASSAD DOES ACKNOWLEDGE
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TO SOME DEGREE THE POSITIVE IMPACT ON ISRAELI, US, AND WORLD PUBLIC OPINION OF SADAT'S INITIATIVE, BUT HE APPEARS CONVINCED THAT THIS IMPACT WILL BE INSUFFICIENT TO ACHIEVE HIS OBJECTIVES. HE SEEMS TO BELIEVE THE ARABS, ONCE REUNITED, CAN MAKE ISRAEL CHOOSE TO ACCEPT THE AMBIGUITIES OF THE PEACE HE IS PREPARED TO OFFER OVER THE PROSPECT TO ANOTHER WAR. NEVERTHELESS, WE SUBMIT THAT UNDER CERTAIN CIRCUMSTANCES ASSAD MAY BE BROUGHT TO OFFER ISRAEL POSITIVE INCENTIVES IN TERMS OF PEACE AND EVEN NORMALIZATION, BUT THIS WILL NOT COME ABOUT AS LONG AS HE SEES THE ARAB SIDE IN A POSTION OF WEAKNESS.

5. IF SADAT'S PRESENT COURSE FAILS AND HE IS PREPARED TO ABJURE THE BILATERAL APPROACH, THIS, IN ASSAD'S EYES, WILL GO A LONG WAY TOWARD CORRECTING THE AREA IMBALANCE. NEVERTHELESS, HE WILL WANT TO SEE A FOLLOW-ON NEGOTIATING FRAMEWORK, WHETHER IN NEW YORK OR GENEVA OR EVEN A COMPREHENSIVE US MEDIATION, WHICH PRECLUDES THE KIND OF INDIVIDUALISM SADAT HAS PRACTIVED TO DATE.

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6. ASSUMING, HOWEVER, THAT SADAT'S INITIATIVE DOES NOT COLLAPSE, WE SHOULD NOT BE SURPRISED IF ASSAD REMAINS IN OPPOSITION TO IT. HE HAS MADE NO SECRET OF HIS INTENTION TO CORRECT THE IMBALANCE CAUSED BY SADAT'S CONTINUED PURSUIT, WITH US HELP, OF BILATERAL NEGOTIATIONS. IN THE WAKE OF SADAT'S INITIATIVE ASSAD SEEMED TO BE SEEKING AN ALTERNATIVE TO EGYPT IN THE AREA POWER BALANCE BY FORMING THE STADFASTNESS FRONT. WHEN LEBANON ERUPTED, HE LEARNED THAT THERE WAS NO ALTERNATIVE. ALGERIA IS PREOCCUPIED WITH THE SHAARAN QUESTION, LIBYA IS UNDEPENDABLE, AND ERRATIC, AMR SOUTH YEMEN IS A NON-ENTITY. THE ONLY OTHER POWER WITH POTENTIAL MILITARY SIGNIFICANCE IN THE MIDDLE EAST CONFRONTATION IS IRAQ; AND IRAQ, IN ADDITION TO WANTING ASSAD'S FALL MORE THAN BEGIN'S, MUST ALSO FACE EAST MILITARILY. IRAN CAN, ACCORDING TO ASSAD'S RECKONING, EFFECTIVELY BLOCK ANY REAL PROSPECT OF SYRO-IRAQI MILITARY COOPERATION, AND AS AFR AS ASSAD IS CONCERNED IRAN ANSWERS TO THE UNITED STATES. ASSAD
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WE SUSPECT MUST HAVE UNHAPPILY CONCLUDED THAT HE IS CONDEMNED AT PRESENT TO REACT TO EGYPTIAN MOVES.

7. ASSAD IS WELL AWARE THAT THE CONVERSE IS NOT NECESSARILY TRUE. ISRAEL CAN BE GENEROUS IN THE SINAI TO PRESERVE ITS INTERESTS IN THE GOLAN AND WEST BANK AND ITS AIM OF MINIMIZING THE THREAT OF A TWO-FRONT WAR. FOR ITS PART, EGYPT HAS NO VITAL NATIONAL STAKE IN THE PALESTINIAN PROBLEM OR THE GOLAN ALTHOUGH TURNING ITS BACK ON EITHER WILL DAMAGE ITS LEADERSHIP ROLE AMONG THE ARABS. ASSAD'S NIGHTMARE MUST BE THAT BEGIN WILL WAKE UP TO THE OPPORTUNITIES BEING OFFERED HIM AND WILL AGREE TO A STATEMENT OF PRINCIPLES IN RETURN FOR A SIGNED AND IMPLEMENTED BILATERAL SETTLEMENT WITH SADAT. ASSAD WOULD BE LEFT, AS HE WAS IN 1975, WITH A NON-ENFORCEABLE PLEDGE AND A SECURE ISRAEL CONFIDENT IN ITS ABILITY TO PAINLESSLY WITHSTAND ANY SYRIAN

OR PALESTINIAN THREAT TO ITS RETENTION OF THE WEST BANK AND THE GOLAN. AN EXPANDED NEGOTIATION ON SADAT'S TERMS, IN LIEU OF A BILATERAL EGYPTIAN-ISRAELI ACCORD, DOES NOT APPEAL ANY MORE TO ASSAD. IT WOULD STILL BE BASED ON ARAB DIVISION AND SEAKNESS, AND STILL GIVE ISRAEL THE OPTION OF COMING TO TERMS WITH ARAB MODERATES, WHILE FREEZING OUT THE PLO AND SYRIA. SINCE ASSAD WILL NVEVER STRUST SADAT OR THE US TO GUARANTEE HIS INTERESTS, HE WILLEENTER SUCH NEGOTIATIONS ON ONE CONDITION, THAT HE HAS VETO POWER OVER THE PACE AND TRUST OF NEGOTIATIONS, I.E., ESSENTIALLY THE SAME TEMS HE WAS DEMANDING PRIOR TO SADAT'S JERUSALEM VISIT. NEITHER SADAT NOR BEGIN IS LIKELY TO AGREE TO GIVING HIM THIS ICNH. UNDER THESE CONDITIONS A STATMENT OF PRINCIPLES, REGARDLESS OF ITS CONTENT, WILL NOT ENTICE SYRIA INTO NEGOTIATIONS WITH ISRAEL. THE CONSOLATION PRIZE OF A PREDOMINANT SYRIAN ROLE IN LEBANON WILL NOT BE ENOUGH TO BUY HAS ACQUIESENCE. ASSAD WILL CONTINUE TO OPPOSE THE ISRAELI-EGYPTIAN NEGOTIATION WHATEVER IT PRODUCES.

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8. ASSAD'S POLICY HAS BEEN AND WILL CONTINE TO BE DESIGN TO PREVENT A BILATERAL EGYPTIAN SETTLEMENT OR A SETTLEMENT BY AN ARAB MODERATE COALITION WHICH EXCLUDES SYRIA. THROUGH PROPAGANDA ATTACKS ASSAD MAY HAVE HELPED PROVEKE SADAT TO GO REPEATEDLY ON RECORD AS REJECTING A BILATERAL SOLUTION AND UPHOLDING PALESTINIAN RIGHTS. SADAT HAS TALKED ABOUT MODERATE PALESTINIANS AS OPPOSED TO THE PLO BUT TO PRESERVE CREDIBILITY AND SUPPORT IN CRITICAL ARAB COUNTRIES LIKE SAUDI ARABIA, HE HAS TO FIND SOME NON-PLO MODERATES READY TO STAND UP AND BE COUNTED. THIS HE HAS BEEN UNABLE TO DO. AS LONG AS ASSAD KEEPS THE PLO MORE OR LESS IN HIS CORNER, AND SADAT FINDS NO RESPECTABLE COUNTERVAILING PALESTINIAN FORCE TO APPROVE HIS ACTIONS, IT WILL BE DIFFICULT FOR SADAT, EVEN AFTER GAINING A STATEMENT OF PRINCIPLES, TO TURN HIS BACK ON THE PROBLEM WITHOUT FINDING HIMSELF ISOLATED IN THE ARAB WORLD. ASSAD WOULD DO EVERYTHING IN HIS POWER TO SEE THAT SADAT REMAINS ISOLATED. WE QUESTION WHETHER ASSAD CAN EVER MOVE THE SAUDIS INTO OPPOSTING SADAT, BUT HE CAN CERTAINLY MAKE THEM FEEL UNCOMFORTABLE AND HE MAY BE ABLE TO STALL EFFORTS TO MOVE JORDAN INTO AN EXPANDED NEGOTIATION UNLESS THE ARAB MODERATES ARE CONVINCED THE UNITED STATES WOULD FORCE THE PACE ON THE OUTSTANDING ISSUES RAISED BY THE DECLARATION OF PRINCIPLES.

9. TO DO THIS, I SUSPECT THE US WOULD HAVE TO COME UP WITH A BETTER ANSWER THAN SADAT'S UNIDENTIFIED (AND POSSIBLY UNIDENTIFIABLE) "PALESTINIAN MODERATES" TO DEAL WITH THE QUESTION OF WHO SPEAKS FOR THE PALESTINIANS. THE POINT HAS BEEN MADE THAT THE MORE SADAT MOVES AWAY FROM SYRIA, THE MORE SYRIA NEEDS THE PLO AND THE LESS INCLINED ASSAD IS TO ACT AS

A RESTRAINT ON THE ORGANIZATION. UNFETTERED AND FIGHTING FOR ITS EXISTENCE, THE PLO WOULD BE DIFFICULT TO IGNORE IN COUNTRIES LIKE JORDAN, KUWAIT, AND EVEN SAUDI ARABIA. THUS, T WIN VITAL, OTHER MODERATE ARAB PARTICIPATION IN AND SUPPORT FOR EXPANDED NEGOTIATIONS, THE US MIGHT EVEN HAVE TO FIND A WAY TO INCLUDE THE PLO IN THE NEGOTIATION EQUATION. IF WE SO DECIDE
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AND ARE PREPARED TO FACE THE ISRAELIS DOWN ON THIS ISSUE, WE WHOULD BE ABLE TO NEUTRALIZE ASSAD, AND IN THE PROCESS PERHAPS ALTER HIS PERCEPTION OF THE ELEMENTS OF THE AREA'S POWER BALANCE.

10. ASSAD IS NOT BLIND TO THE CRITICAL ROLE THE US PLAYS IN THE AREA BALANCE BY ITS SUPPORT FOR ISRAEL. ONE PROBABLE REASON ASSAD DECIDED TO DEVELOP STRONG BILATERAL RELATIONSHIP REGRDLESS OF OUR POLICY DIFFERENCES IS THAT HE SEES US AS AN IMMEDIATE HEDGE AGAINST THE ISRAELIS IN LEBANON AND A POTENTIAL SOFTENER OF ISRAELI INTRANSIGENCE. WHERE HE PARTS COMPANY WITH SADAT'S 99 PERCENT ESTIMATE OF THE US ROLE IN NEGOTIATIONS IS THAT ASSAD DOES NOT BELIEVE THE US IS POLITICALLY CAPABLE RIGHT NOW OF PUTTING SUFFICIENT PRESSURE ON THE ISRAELIS TO MAKE UP FOR THE LACK OF ARAB POWER. WE CAN TURN ASSAD INTO A BELIEVE ONLY BY DINT OF EXAMPLE. AT PRESENT ASSAD IS INTERESTED IN NEGOTIATIONS ONLY INsofar AS THEY HELP HIM BRING ABOUT AN ENVIRONMENT, I.E., ARAB UNITY AND ISRAELI ISOLATION, FAVORABLE TO OBTAINING HOS OBJECTIVES. HE IS NOT INTERESTED IN A SUBSTANTIVE GIVE-AND-TAKE WITH AN UNCERTAIN OUTCOME. AS LONG AS HE HOLD TO THESE PARAMETERS, I SEE LITTLE HOPE FOR SUCDESSFUL NEGOTIATIONS INVOLVING SYRIA. IT SEEMS TO ME, THEREFORE, THAT WE SHOULD NOT WORRY UNDULY ABOUT ASSAD AT THIS POINT. WE SHOULD CONTINUE TO HOLD HIS HAND AND STRENGTHEN OUR BILATERAL TIES IN FULL EXPECTION THAT IF WE CCAN DEMONSTRABLY MOVE THE ISRAELIS IN THE DIRECTOR OF A TRULY COMPREHENSIVE SETTLEMENT WE WILL, IN THE END, AUTOMATICALLY GIVE HIM THE NECESSARY INDUCEMENT TO ENTER THE PROCESS.
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